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The Feeling of Thought: T.S. Eliot's Programmatic Poetry.

Amélie Ducroux

Eliot's resistance to theory

1 "If, as James Thomson observed, 'lips only sing when they cannot kiss,' it may also be that poets only talk when they cannot sing." This is the conclusion of Eliot's series of lectures delivered at Harvard University during the winter of 1932-33 and published as *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (Eliot, 1950 156). In many of his essays, Eliot tried to define his poetics and to set his aesthetic standards. This declaration is a way for him to question the validity of his own attempt to theorize about poetry, in a dismissive gesture meant to reassert his identity as a poet. But this declaration, along with the line of thought developed in these lectures, also suggests a clear separation between critical discourse and poetic writing. "Talk" appears as a supplement to poetry, as a provisional outlet when the poet's ability to "sing" fails him or when the explanation forced upon him by a reader in need of clarification leads him to resort to discourse. This statement could also imply that, as far as theory is concerned, only "talks" should be taken into account and that "the rest"– poetry – "is silence", or a pure song whose capacity to affect the senses should be enough to silence the mind. But why should the terms "theory" and "song" be antithetical? If Eliot's essays have largely contributed to his reputation as a critic, is it fair to separate "the man who [sings]" and "the mind which [thinks]"[1], or to deny the existence of theory or aesthetic considerations as an undertone, or under-tune, of his poetry? The question of the relation between thought and feeling in Eliot's poetics is too complex to be thoroughly analysed in this article. This concern can be traced back to Eliot's early training in philosophy and his rejection of F. H. Bradley's concept of "immediate experience," the postulate of the immediately given which allows him to elaborate his theory of knowledge. According to Bradley, immediate feeling is divided at a later stage by thought and analysis. If Bradley himself presented the existence of such an immediate experience as doubtful, Eliot asserted that such a stage of "non-relational experience does not exist" (Eliot, 1964 27). "This is

because for Eliot," Manju Jain writes, "there is no stage of consciousness at which we do not find feeling and thought together [...] whereas Bradley stresses that there is no thought without feeling, Eliot emphasizes that there is no feeling without thought." (Jain, 1992 207) Therefore, the feeling that goes into writing poetry or the feeling in which writing itself has originated is always already marked by thought and analysis. And the partition of their respective modes of inscription would be as irrelevant as the attempt to circumscribe their respective fields of action in the consciousness of the poet at the time of composition.

2 Composition is not only a reunion between the poet, his feelings his thoughts and the object he wants to create; it also includes the deep awareness of the literary works of the past and the felt necessity to constantly interact with them. But such an interaction does not require the use of the openly discursive mode; it takes place in poetic writing itself. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot tried to define what composition meant for him and insisted on the notion of tradition as a necessary constituent of the poet's artistic awareness. The "discourse" developed in most of his essays has led many readers to consider Eliot as a traditional modernist, attached to the past and to the monumental dimension of literature. Yet his poetry, be it openly discursive as in *Four Quartets*, or apparently devoid of any programmatic dimension, as in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" or "Portrait of a Lady", seems to offer another kind of theoretical discourse.

3 Eliot's stance on theory is actually very ambivalent. In the last of the lectures delivered at Harvard he acknowledges, or pretends to acknowledge, his own limits as far as theory is concerned: "The extreme of theorising about the nature of poetry, the essence of poetry if there is any, belongs to the study of aesthetics and is no concern of the poet or of a critic with my limited qualifications." (Eliot, 1950 149-50) In his essay on *Hamlet*, Eliot, though a passionate critic himself, blames that "most dangerous type of critic," who projects his/her own emotions onto works of art:

> [...] the critic with a mind which is naturally of the creative order, but which through some weakness in creative power exercises itself in criticism instead. These minds often find in Hamlet a vicarious existence for their own artistic realization. Such a mind had Goethe, who made of Hamlet a Werther; and such had Coleridge, who made of Hamlet a Coleridge. (Eliot, 1951 141)

4 Such provocative debunking of great authors is part of Eliot's game and should not be taken at face-value; it may not be more than the falsely naïve way and fairly innocuous tool of the zealous grown-up schoolboy Eliot sometimes impersonates in his essays. This remark leads us to think that the only kind of valid criticism a text can produce is its own manifestation as text; the critic himself is only supposed to reveal such a manifestation.

"Time to murder and create": tradition, memory, intertextuality

5 In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot stresses the importance of the writer's awareness of the past, of tradition and of the "historical sense," "indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year". These remarks have contributed to build Eliot's repute as a staunch defender of tradition:

> [...] and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. (Eliot, 1951 14)

6 This awareness of the past and of tradition goes along with the impossibility for the individual poet to be meaningful in himself:

> No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism. [...] what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. (Eliot, 1951 15)

7 The insistence on "the existing monuments" of literature, of the "literature of Europe," has led other modernists advocating another type of modernism to consider Eliot as the enemy they loved to hate. William Carlos Williams thus wrote in his *Autobiography*: "Critically Eliot returned us to the classroom just at the moment when I felt that we were on the point of an escape to matters much closer to the essence of a new art form itself–rooted in the locality which should give it fruit. I knew at once that in certain ways I was most defeated." (Williams, 1967 174) But we cannot take Eliot's insistence on the past as simply an allegiance to tradition, knowing that he keeps underlying the interconnection between the works of the past and every new work that is being produced. If Eliot, as William Carlos Williams feared, "returned [him] to the classroom," it may have been with the intention not so much to preserve the works of those canonical European writers he admires so much, such as Dante, Shakespeare or the Metaphysical Poets, but to play with them and distort them, not so much to sit silently and listen to the "quiet-voiced elders" teach him a lesson, but to ransack the place.

8 It would be interesting, then, to compare these statements from "Tradition and the Individual Talent" with Eliot's poetics of dispossession as it develops in his poetry, notably in *Four Quartets*. Another statement near the end of his essay encourages such a confrontation. There Eliot deals with "the *métier* of poetry" and with the task of the poet: "What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality." (Eliot, 1951 17) The notion of "self-sacrifice," even if it is linked with the concept of impersonality inherent in Eliot's poetics, may be read along different lines if we are willing to think to the tune of his poetry.

9 Eliot's poetics first invites us to consider memory as monumental memory, meant to preserve and strengthen the authority of the works Eliot invokes and of his own works, even if remembering always entails revaluating and rereading. Yet, the notion of authority as it appears through his poetic practice is made highly problematic not only by the fact that a poem like *The Waste Land* is itself the product of a collaboration with Ezra Pound whose work on Eliot's text has invalidated, from the start, the conception of a single, stable authority, but also by the disseminating effect of intertextuality. The questioning of authority performed by modernism either by re-centering language on itself, with Gertrude Stein among others, choosing common rather than noble objects (here we can think of William Carlos Williams), inserting foreign languages, erasing or

duplicating punctuation marks (with Pound or Cummings), turning the poet into a rule-breaker trespassing the laws of syntax, is also to be found in the poems of Eliot that have most contributed to build his reputation as a "father" of high modernism, that is, as a figure of authority. Beyond the quality of the literary, cultural and semantic echoes they always constitute, quotations are also, if not primarily, considered by him as poetic material, fragments of sound, stretches of poetic matter with a proper shape and density that the poet will try to weave into his own poetic tissue, or rework and remodel so as to complete the fusion of the supposedly original with the secondary. Eliot distorts certain quotations according to his poetic needs. To give but one example: the words of Pia de' Tolomei in Dante's *Purgatorio* are adapted to the speech of the modern Thames daughter in "The Fire Sermon," herself a modern version of Wagner's Rhine-daughters in *Götterdämmerung*, the last opera of The Ring Cycle. "*Siena mi fé, disfecemi Maremma*"–which was also the title of one of the thirteen poems composing the first part of Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920)–becomes "Highbury bore me. Richmond and Kew /Undid me." (Eliot, 1974 63-4). In Eliot's poem, the identity of the speaker remains unknown. The female voice seems to be pondering over her present situation and state of mind after a supposedly traumatic event whose circumstances, causes and consequences remain obscure ("My feet are at Moorgate, and my heart / Under my feet."). Linking this voice to both Pia de' Tolomei and the Rhine daughters gives it different layers of personality and inscribes it in a larger feminine experience, even if the common points between them all are difficult to grasp given the lack of substance that prevents the feminine voice here from turning into a figure. Interpretation is far from prevented, though; we could, for instance, surmise that what links those female "figures" is the fact that they have been unable to protect what they were supposed to protect, be it their own honor and integrity, or the Rhine/Thames gold. Yet the dissemination of the references through their relocation and modification prevents any stable interpretation, and the force of this rewriting may lie precisely in the impossibility to posit any definite and ultimate linkage. The passage from Dante's Italian to modern English, from the exotic-sounding names of Siena and Maremma to familiar names of London boroughs, stations and suburban towns is a form of demotion whose poetic counterpart may be found in the loss of the beautiful mirror-effect of Dante's line: [ena]-[mi]-[fe]/[fe]-[mi]-[ema], replaced with the far more simple repetition of the sound [i:] and the alliterations "**b**ury", "**b**ore", "**m**e", "Rich**m**ond", "**m**e". Eliot's modified quotation carries the weight of a literary memory which is constantly reprocessing its materials and adapting them to the immediate social and textual context. Pia de' Tolomei was unfairly charged with adultery by her husband, imprisoned then allegedly thrown from a window of her castle, in order for him to be able to marry his lover. The figure had been made famous by Donizetti's opera in 1837 and Rossetti's painting in the late 1860's. Eliot's poem presents a gradual process of depersonalisation, from this singular legendary figure to the hypothetically stranded modern Rhine/Thames daughter whose impersonal voice can be heard here. The ring of multi-layered references allows Eliot to give some emotional potential to his impersonal voices. The stolen material is not meant to adorn or complement his own text but rather to reveal a lack of authority and substantiality itself constitutive of the modernist aesthetics. Such a revelation is made possible by the confrontation of materials at the heart of the intertextual practice.

10 Contrary to what we might expect, glorification may not be the leading principle of Eliot's active relation to the old monuments of literature. If Eliot's essays betray his

admiration for the great European writers who form his personal pantheon, admiration turns into an active process. His compulsive use of quotations sometimes resembles kleptomania. But Eliot's stolen pieces, however disguised they may be, are, most of the time, recognizable and meant to be recognized by his ideal, educated reader, which places him at the frontier between reverence and defiance, between homage and bold appropriation. Richard Shusterman insists on the dynamic nature of Eliot's conception of tradition, comparing it to Gadamer's:

> Like Eliot's, Gadamer's concept of tradition is globally comprehensive rather than elitely, aesthetically restricted. It is, moreover, immanently socially real and changing rather than transcendentally ideal and timeless. Largely unconscious, tradition is mainly transmitted through social breeding and imbibed through basic linguistic training though some of its most conscious achievements demand a specially conscious effort to understand them. Tradition contains both good and bad, and requires constant criticism and change to keep it vital and worthy. [...] For Gadamer, as for Eliot, tradition–being inextricably linked with language–constitutes the preconditioned and preconditioning matrix and medium of our thought. (Davidson, 1999 32)

11 Admiration has to do with the way one looks at something or someone. "[C]onstant criticism and change" can also be thought to constitute a peculiar modality of admiration that implies active involvement. Re-appropriating poetic fragments, with the risk of altering their connotations by giving them new contexts, may be the ultimate form of admiration, namely the attempt to keep those works alive, by transplanting some of their cells and allowing them to develop on the new, fertile ground of a poetry still in the making. This attitude towards old literary works, through the distortion of some of their components, goes along with a relative indifference to the preservation of his own works if preservation means the stultification and oblivion born of an excess of praise and deference. Didn't he once say that *The Waste Land* was "just a piece of rhythmical grumbling"[2]? (Valerie Eliot, 1971 1) We can feel a perpetual self-dispossession at work in his poetic practice. The poems remember themselves, and the poet, writing, remembers himself writing. But what he remembers is the transience of the creative moment and the unstable, shifting nature of words and phrases, as in "Burnt Norton":

> [...] Words strain,
> Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
> Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
> Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
> Will not stay still. [...] (Eliot, 1974 182)

12 His past work is always considered as "work in progress" to some extent, for "[t]he pattern is new in every moment." This line wrenched from "East Coker" can be applied to the creative process itself. Poetry as sensible object is always already dispensable and outdated:

> [...] Last season's fruit is eaten
> And the fullfed beast shall kick the empty pail.
> For last year's words belong to last year's language
> And next year's words await another voice. (Eliot, 1974 205)

13 In his own intertextual practice, the reference in itself does not really matter. The text is reduced to a trace constantly retracing itself, which echoes what Eliot writes in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," namely the fact that the works of the past are altered by the works of the present. This "idea" as it incarnates itself in his poetic practice leads us further than the statement about tradition in his essay. The essay

relies much on rhetoric, yet such a statement also sounds metaphorical. This is at least how it seems to have been considered, for critics rarely comment on this possible alteration of past works by new works. But implications of the poetic manifestation of this idea may be much more literal and radical than the seemingly metaphorical language in which it is conveyed in the essay. It may be considered more literal insofar as Eliot, in his poems, actually alters the fragments he "borrows." He also alters that "existing order" of literature mentioned in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," by sewing together fragments of texts belonging to various periods of literary history, thus composing a new order, which is actually a *dis*order.

14 The implications of the poetic near-equivalents for his theory of tradition are more "radical" because Eliot, through his poetry, actually questions the value of the literary text as such, building his own monument from the "old stones" of deconstructed, or deconstructing texts. But what kind of monument is Eliot's then? The mutual alteration of past and present works could be compared to the mutual alteration of the diverse fragments of his own poems, *The Waste Land* especially, or even of his different poems, if we bear in mind the many "self-echoes" we can find throughout his poetry. Eliot writes in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" that the poet who is aware of this mutual alteration "will be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities." What are those "responsibilities" the poet should be aware of? One of them could be the responsibility resulting from the inscription of a singular voice ("the individual talent") on the canvas of tradition. But if each individual poetic voice, each "individual talent," in altering tradition, inscribes itself in that tradition, then what *is* tradition? Shouldn't we give the essay another title, such as "Individual Talents and the Individual Talent?" or even, "Tradition *is* Individual Talent"?

"And time yet for a hundred indecisions": doubting in tune

15 The idea of a constant alteration of the literary order, of an essential instability, is not only *expressed* in his poetry, on what would be a poetic "expository mode," but put into play, actualized through his poetic writing, through his intertextual practice, but also through the ambiguity of his syntax which sometimes renders the song of theory as beguiling as open to revision or attunement:

> It is impossible to say just what I mean!
> But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:
> Would it have been worth while
> If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,
> And turning toward the window, should say:
> 'That is not it at all,
> That is not what I meant at all.' (Eliot, 1974 6-7)

16 This desperate cry from the poetic voice of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" could first be interpreted as the formulation of the very impossibility to formulate its intentions in an adequate and satisfying way ("just what I mean"). The projection of the "nerves" on a screen could be seen as a way out of this inadequacy between intention and expression through the representation of all the complex ramifications of the speaker's thoughts. But the adverb "just" could also express restriction and the sentence itself the fact that poetic writing, here in the guise of "speech" ("say"), always exceeds the poet's intentions ("what I mean"/"what I meant"). The image projected by

the "magic lantern" would then be a representation of this very impossibility to localize a core of meaning in the poem, because of its ramified nature. The poem is made of "patterns" of "nerves." The branching out it stages is endless. Then the presence of the colon followed by the use of the past conditional ("Would it have been") and the voicing of the feared inadequacy between that projected representation and the intention of some "one"–another speaker or the same?–imply that even the projection is no solution, for intention and expression can never coalesce. Behind poetic formulations that are simple in appearance but rendered ambiguous by the choice of specific word sequences, grammatical forms ("It is impossible to," "But as if"), punctuation, and by quick shifts of tenses, lurks a possible theory of poetic expression that does not present itself as entirely formulated, but relies instead on the very possibility of intellectual "visions and revisions."

17 The poem itself can never deliver its own manifesto as the other finite object it would have been sketching while completing its own inscription as a poem, or a gem-like, self-sufficient stanza shining among sister stanzas and begging to be read as manifesto. Like the Chinese jar of "Burnt Norton," it "still /Moves perpetually in its stillness [...] /Or say that the end precedes the beginning" (Eliot, 1974 182). If we distort this metaphor and read the "end" as the theoretical message the poem would deliver or set out to manifest, we can say that this "end" is already there when the reader starts reading the poem. In other words, it cannot be said. This echoes the following remark in Eliot's first lecture given at Harvard, in November 1932:

> The critical mind operating *in* poetry, the critical effort which goes to the writing of it, may always be in advance of the critical mind operating *upon* poetry, whether it be one's own or some one else's. I only affirm that there is a significant relation between the best poetry and the best criticism of the same period. The age of criticism is also the age of critical poetry. And when I speak of modern poetry as being extremely critical, I mean that the contemporary poet, who is not merely a composer of graceful verses,–is forced to ask himself such questions as 'what is poetry for?'; not merely 'what am I to say?' but rather 'how and to whom am I to say it?' (Eliot, 1950 30)

18 Eliot's statements in the aftermath of his conversion have led some critics to read the poems written after 1927 as "religious" ones, or at least as expressing a desire for some kind of plenitude or absolute. But can this "heart" which seems to offer itself in his later poems ever be "detached" from the peculiar form of writing that gives it life? Is the discursive, dialectical nature of *Four Quartets* only a channel for the expression of beliefs or concepts? Isn't this peculiar mode itself the "belief" that is expressed by Eliot at the latest stage of his career, the belief in the need for such dialectics, notably for the dialectics of exclusion ("neither/nor") and inclusion ("both/and") which inscribe doubt and the impossibility of closure as tenets one cannot reduce, when all has been sung and done?

19 Denis Donoghue insists on the need to apprehend Eliot's poetry and especially *Four Quartets* as *positively* "discursive," that is, capable of creating concepts and generating thought by its own, poetic, means:

> Most of the critical procedures that have been used in the analysis of poems have concentrated upon image, symbol, and structure. No critical method has arisen that proposes to show the poetic character and potentiality of discourse. It is still an effort to take the harm out of the word "discursive" [...] It might have been expected, especially after the publication of Stevens's *Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction*, that a critical method sensitive to poetry as a work in the creation of new

> concepts might have been developed. It has not happened. Readers are still encouraged to believe that a poem is an action (or a structure) of words chiefly concerned with the development of the resources of imagery and symbolism within the fiction of dramatic monologue. The discrimination of concepts is regarded as fit matter for an essay, but not for a poem. (Donoghue, 269)

20 If, as Donoghue argues, "the discrimination of concepts" is usually not considered as "fit matter" "for a poem", it may be because the poetic mode summons other faculties of the reader that are not considered primarily in their relation to the "discrimination of concepts." At the end of "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot writes that the poet should live "in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past." In "Burnt Norton," such a claim is developed on a poetic mode: "What might have been and what has been /Point to one end, which is always present." (Eliot, 1974 177) The experience of the rose-garden, around which the poem is built, is a pretext. This idea of a possibility never actualized, "what *might* have been," echoes "the present moment of the past" Eliot mentioned in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." The "one end" such an experience–or "non-experience"–points to, is the present moment of the poem itself, the present of writing, in which this absent experience *takes* place.

21 What is to be gained then, from this poetic form of aesthetic expression, compared to the "expository mode" of his theoretical essays, even if his essays are far from exempt of metaphors and poetic formulations? First, we may state the obvious: the "idea" or "theory" expressed through repetitions, echoes and images, has more power to affect the reader. But it is stronger, too, insofar as it is absolutely inseparable from the poem in which it incarnates itself. Although the "statement" points to "what might have been," to the "passage which we did not take /Towards the door we never opened /Into the rose-garden" (Eliot, 1974 177), the experience is present in the poem, in what appears as a dream in which every sensory experience is always one echo or one appearance away from reality:

> Other echoes
> Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?
> Quick, said the bird, find them, find them,
> Round the corner. Through the first gate,
> Into our first world, shall we follow
> The deception of the thrush? Into our first world.
> There they were, dignified, invisible,
> Moving without pressure, over the dead leaves,
> In the autumn heat, through the vibrant air,
> And the bird called, in response to
> The unheard music hidden in the shrubbery,
> And the unseen eyebeam crossed, for the roses
> Had the look of flowers that are looked at. (Eliot, 1974 177-8)

22 The music is "unheard," the "eyebeam" that "crosse[s]" is "unseen" and the pool is empty, only filled with illusion. The visit to the rose-garden is described only to be revealed as an absent experience or the experience of absence, whose "end" is nothing but the poem. The reader is invited to experience this absence on a poetic mode in the first stanza of the poem, where the acoustic imprint of words left on the reader's mind is certainly not meant to be less intense than any experience of absence in an unmediated form:

> Time present and time past
> Are both perhaps present in time future,
> And time future contained in time past.

If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden. My words echo
Thus, in your mind.
But to what purpose
Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves
I do not know. (Eliot, 1974 177)

23 The "echo" of the words inscribed on the page is compared to the "footfalls" that "echo in the memory /Down the passage which we did not take /Into the rose-garden." These words are like the residue of experience. The echo of a "footfall" is the acoustic trace of a bodily experience one is no longer living; the emphasis put on the adverb "[t]hus," with the run-on-line and the following comma, is an invitation to experience the echo itself. The printed words appear as echoes left in the wake of writing, awaiting a reader. When we read them, we voice them mentally. By doing so, we actualize the "echo" whose existence appears to our consciousness at the very moment when our eyes meet this point in the syntax, this adverb that has been slightly deferred by the line break after "echo." At this point, poetic language is almost performative and what takes place in the reader's "mind" is the *experience* of the echo, tinged with the *idea* of the echo that appeared in the previous lines ("Footfalls echo in the memory..."). The isolated sentence that follows is a threshold, an invitation to go beyond a limit, to "distur[b] the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves." The poet invites us to experience the impossible, to go backward, back to a time when the roses whose remains are now covered with dust were still living organisms. In the realm of poetic writing, the impossible is no longer impossible, only purposeless; it does not know the limits of reality. Those limits are represented and negated at the same time by this passage, or threshold: "But to what purpose /Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves /I do not know," which literally opens the doors to the rose-garden, allowing the reader to experience the impossible while reminding him all the way of the illusory nature of this experience, with such sign-posts as "echoes," "deception," "invisible," "unheard," "hidden," "unseen."

24 The visit to the rose-garden allows us to experience, through a sensory approach of words, rhythm and even grammar, what the poetic voice presents as "deception." But as a dreamer can experience flying without ever having been a bird, the reader can here experience the possibility of living an unlived experience by accepting the invitation of the poetic voice to "follow /The deception of the thrush." The preterit, which appears just after the formulation of this suggestion potentially accepted by the reader, is the tense often used to relate dreams. But in the logic of "Burnt Norton," it corresponds to the revisiting of an experience that has been missed, a return "down the passage which we did not take." The experience of the impossible is made possible through the use of an indicative verb form. The lines inscribe memories that lose the name of "memories" since the experience they are supposed to point back to has never been. The bird who leads us to the rose-garden is also the one who expels us: "Go, said the bird: human kind /Cannot bear very much reality." The experience of the rose-

garden ends thus, in this reversed logic presenting "reality" as the impossible experience of the rose-garden itself. The end of this first part of the poem is a return to a more discursive tone, echoing the first ten lines of the poem: "Time past and time future /What might have been and what has been /Point to one end, which is always present." This could be a sentence from a philosophical essay or from the philosophical works that could have come in lieu of the poems, following after his dissertation on the philosophy of F. H. Bradley. The lines appear not as a comment meant to make the rose-garden passage more explicit, but as its more discursive counterpart. The dialogue between the two is the very dynamics of this first section. Because of their ambiguous syntax and terms, the last lines are as open to thought and speculation as the previous, imaginary depiction of the garden. The word "end" can mean the ultimate limit, the most advanced point on the line of time; its use here would be either neutral or tinged with determinism. Or it can mean "aim," "purpose," in which case it would suggest that every experience whether actual or not, has no value in itself because it is always already mediated by language and the very possibility of its representation. The signifier "present" can also be understood in several ways. It can refer to *the* present, suggesting that any experience, whether lived or only thought of, is an attempt to grasp the present, to experience it as *pure* present. We can also understand that unreal and actual experiences are considered with an equal mind because they point in the same direction, they point to "*one* end;" they are united in the consciousness as movements of will, desire, memory or thought and this "end," this intention, what is aimed at, "is always present," always there in the subject's mind. Such a passage as the beginning of "Burnt Norton" allows us to understand the intimate correlation between the sensory experience of poetry and the experience of thought itself.

25 In the first section of *The Waste Land*, the woman orders her interlocutor to "think:" "What are you thinking of? What thinking? What? /I never know what you are thinking. Think." The answer comes as a "poetic" answer: "I think we are in rat's alley / Where the dead men lost their bones." It calls upon our imagination, forces us to consider all the possible meanings and connotations of the signifiers present in the sequence and of the possible meanings they acquire through their co-presence in this singular linguistic occurrence. Yet the speaker asserts that he is *thinking*, not merely dreaming nor imagining. We can infer that "thinking of" is not enough. Thinking should not only mean relating to a specific object of thought, but trying to create that object through language while experiencing the thought itself, in the deepest way possible. This echoes Eliot's idea about Donne – not lacking in reality just because it *might* have been true–, "A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility." (Eliot, 1951 287)

26 In *Ash-Wednesday*, the poetic voice seems to be looking for a transcendental Word, or signifier, but in fact this word is a lost word. The advent of the "still point of the turning world" around which the *Four Quartets* revolve is announced in *Ash-Wednesday*: "And the light shone in darkness and /Against the Word the unstilled world still whirled /About the centre of the silent Word." (Eliot, 1974 192) The "silent word" is as devoid of substance as the "point." Yet because it has a "centre," it is a centre. This "lost word" is not a word whose trace has been lost, but a trace whose origin has always already been lost. In the "silent word" we can hear an echo of a non assignable presence necessary to the movement of the "turning world" and of the "turning words" that constitute the poem. The "word" the poetic voice wishes to hear "cannot be found." It can only be heard as a *re*-sounding word: "Where shall the word be found,

where will the word /Resound? Not here, there is not enough silence." (Eliot, 1974 92) The verb "resound" suggests the ambiguity at work in this passage. It evokes the echo of words that would be a proof of presence and the repetition of a sound that is always already lost. *Ash-Wednesday*, the poem that would most readily qualify as one of Eliot's religious poems, thus offers the means of its own deconstruction and of the hollowing out of its own commentary.

The odour of discourse

27 In his essay "The Metaphysical Poets" Eliot praises those poets, like John Donne, who could "feel their thoughts as immediately as the odour of a rose" (Eliot, 1951 287) and laments on what he calls the "dissociation of sensibility." But paradoxically, and maybe against his will, Eliot himself encouraged, to some extent, such a dissociation between the ideas formulated in his essays and the feelings and sensations provoked by the sensory experience of reading his poems, by the authoritative, uncompromising and nipping tone of his essays, revealing, more than anything else, a need to convince himself, a tone that may have turned the reader's attention to this mode of discourse while freezing the theoretical potential of his own poems. Why the need to translate the "fragrance" of his poems into theoretical discourse? The essay on "The Metaphysical Poets" is a call for a unification of the reader's sensibility, but it eventually refers the reader to the poems themselves, to the aesthetic experience of reading. Eliot's readers should be able to "feel [his] thoughts as immediately as" they hear the sounds of his poem. Such a sensory apprehension of thought is less easily achieved when reading his essays. His particular tone goes along with the need to define what a good poem is. Yet the sometimes simplistic dialectics of Eliot's essays seems to be soluble in his poetry. In "East Coker" for example, he develops the idea that only the *attempt* matters:

> So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years–
> Twenty years largely wasted, the years of l'entre deux guerres–
> Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
> Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure (Eliot, 1974 190)

28 Such poetics of failure develops itself through a constant oscillation between poetry and comments. The comments are not really meta-poetic because they comment on nothing but what is contiguous within the poem itself; they do not refer to poetry in general, but to the poem which gives them shape. In "East Coker" again, after a stanza dedicated to the development of poetic images (the "late November," "late roses," the "constellations"), he writes:

> That was a way of putting it–not very satisfactory:
> A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,
> Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle
> With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter. (Eliot, 1974 186)

29 Later in the poem, he imagines the reader's reaction to other poetic images that have just been developed, then reformulates and reasserts in more discursive terms what he has just tried to express through that development of images:

> You say I am repeating
> Something I have said before. I shall say it again.
> Shall I say it again? In order to arrive there,

> To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,
> You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy. (Eliot, 1974 188)

30 The conversational structure retained, in spite of the relative deficiency of the potential interlocutor, in some of Eliot's earlier poems allows him to create speakers who speak for his poetry as much as they speak for themselves. His poetic "program" then manifests itself in the conflicts that emerge between these divergent voices. In "Conversation Galante" or "Portrait of a Lady," the feminine voice asserts, in a more or less direct way, a number of principles against which the masculine voice can stand. In "Conversation Galante," the poetic digressions of the masculine voice, for instance, are attacked by the lady who considers his metaphors useless and sterile, in spite of the swollen, not to say pregnant aspect of the object chosen here as an image:

> I observe: 'Our sentimental friend the moon!
> Or possibly (fantastic, I confess)
> It may be Prester John's balloon
> Or an old battered lantern hung aloft
> To light poor travellers to their distress.'
> She then: 'How you digress!' (Eliot, 1974 25)

31 In the last stanza, the poet acknowledges his own tendency to digress, and formulates, in a self-derisive tone, what can still be considered as a poetic manifesto, however "mad" it may be:

> 'You, madam, are the eternal humorist,
> The eternal enemy of the absolute,
> Giving our vagrant moods the slightest twist!
> With your air indifferent and imperious
> At a stroke our mad poetics to confute–(Eliot, 1974 25)

32 The lines seem to "follow like a tedious argument /Of insidious intent,"[3] under cover of a polite or domestic argument. The "logic of imagination" as Eliot calls it in his preface to Saint John Perse's *Anabasis*, opposes the logic and syntax of rational discourse.

33 It would be interesting to confront "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and the essay "Hamlet," in which he presents the now famous concept of "objective correlative." In "Hamlet," Eliot defines the "objective correlative" thus: "The only way of expressing emotion is by finding an 'objective correlative;' in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked." He provides an example of such failure to find an appropriate "formula," namely Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, thus criticizing Shakespeare himself: "Hamlet, like the sonnets, is full of some stuff that the writer could not drag to light, contemplate, or manipulate into art." (Eliot, 1951 145)

34 What we find in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is in fact the poetic manifestation of the difficulty to find "the verbal equivalents for states of mind and feeling," a "task" in which the Metaphysical Poets themselves were engaged. (Eliot, 1951 289) The speaker cannot speak, finds it impossible to "say *just* what [he] means!" He cannot find apt equivalents for his overwhelming emotions or intentions that remain an "overwhelming question" hovering over the poem. As David Spurr writes,

> The conflict between purposive action and aimless movement coincides throughout the poem with a similar thematic opposition between discourse and the inarticulate [...] the language of discourse, like the language of spatial movement, leads deceptively toward what appears as a destination in the "overwhelming question" before shutting the door in our faces: " Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?'" (Spurr, 1984 5)

35 The voice of "Prufrock" invokes Hamlet, too, just as Eliot does in the essay in which he defines the "objective correlative:" "No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be." (Eliot, 1974 7) The poet seems to stress the difference between the *persona* of "Prufrock" and Hamlet as a tragic character unable to find verbal equivalents for his emotions, but also the difference between addressing that problem on a critical mode, as he does in "Hamlet," and turning that problem into an object, or even shaping a problematic object, the poem itself, an object resulting from the "contemplat[ion]" and "manipulat[ion] into art" of the "stuff" he may not always have been able "to drag to light" in his essays. The mask of Hamlet, which, as mask, displays the very impossibility of adequacy and identity, could actually be the untimely "verbal equivalent" for that impossibility to find an "objective correlative," for the "state of mind and feeling" which consists in *not* being able to find any equivalent.

36 Eliot's essays are full of digressions and contradictions. His sometimes dogmatic, not to say patronizing, voice in his essays may just be the consequence or the symptom of a difficulty to objectify his own ideas, which are also "states of mind and feeling," or to objectify the desire and possible failure of objectification itself. The poems then offer themselves as a means to do so in a perhaps more persuasive way, because they are, first and foremost, objects that result from a "drag[ging] to light and manipulat[ing] into art" that can now be experienced and felt; and whatever "thoughts" they are made of are to be felt "as immediately as the odour of a rose."

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NOTES

1. Cf. "[...] the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates;" T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *Selected Essays* [1932], London, Faber and Faber, 1952, 18.
2. "Various critics have done me the honour to interpret the poem in terms of criticism of the contemporary world, have considered it, indeed, as an important bit of social criticism. To me it was only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life; it is just a piece of rhythmical grumbling." Quoted by the late Professor Theodore Spencer during a lecture at Harvard University, and recorded by the late Henry Ware Eliot, Jr., the poet's brother. Valerie Eliot, ed., *The Waste Land. A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts*, Orlando, Harcourt, Inc., 1971, 1.
3. Cf. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock :" "Streets that follow like a tedious argument /Of insidious intent." (Eliot, 1974 3)

ABSTRACTS

The provocative tone of T.S. Eliot's essays and lectures and their occasional lack of nuance largely account for the poet's reputation as a figure of authority and as an advocate of a traditional, conservative brand of modernism. But Eliot has never ceased underlining the capacity of poetry to deliver its own poetics, on a mode which allows a sensory approach to thought and meaning and prevents closure. I will try to confront some of the theoretical assertions present in his essays and lectures with his aesthetic "theory" as it incarnates itself, or as it is "sung" in some of his poems, and attempt to show what theory can gain from this peculiar mode of discourse that only poetic writing can generate.

Le ton provocateur des essais et conférences de T.S. Eliot et le manque de nuance de certaines déclarations ont largement contribué à ériger le poète en figure d'autorité et en chantre d'un modernisme traditionnel et conservateur. Eliot n'a cependant jamais cessé de souligner la capacité de la poésie à délivrer sa propre poétique, sur un mode qui permet d'approcher le sens à travers les sens et empêche de le circonscrire. Je tenterai donc de confronter certains des préceptes théoriques formulés dans ses essais et conférences avec sa « théorie » esthétique telle qu'elle s'incarne, ou telle qu'elle est « chantée » dans certains de ses poèmes, en essayant de montrer ce que la théorie peut retirer de ce mode particulier de discours que seule l'écriture poétique est capable de générer.

INDEX

Keywords: tradition, intertextuality, formulation, feeling, thought, discourse, experience, "objective correlative"
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